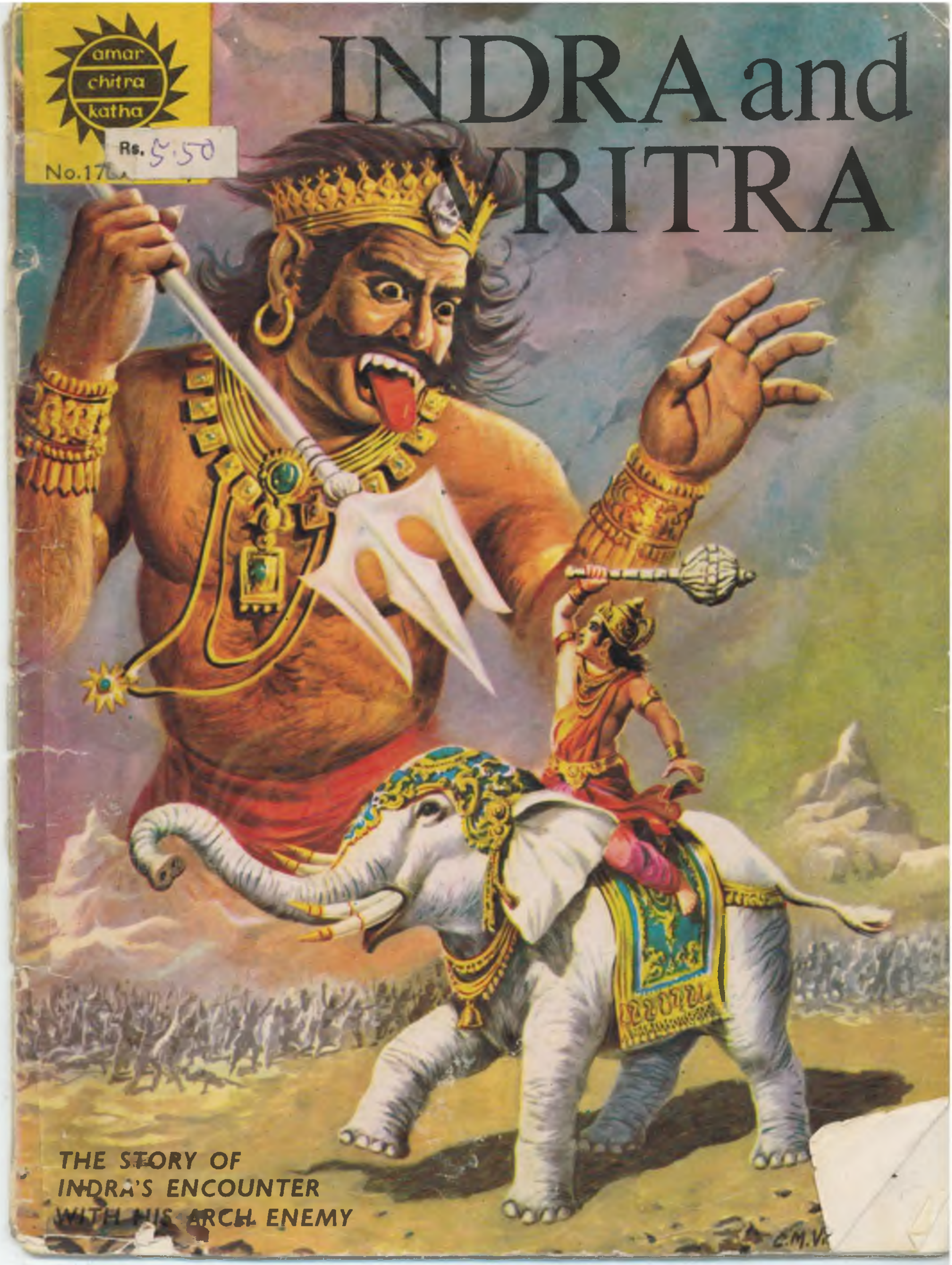

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No.17
INDRA and VRITRA
THE STORY OF INDRA'S ENCOUNTER WITH HIS ARCH ENEMY

In the Vedas, Indra is invoked more often than any other deity. Nearly one-fourth of the hymns in the Rigveda are addressed to him.

The earliest reference to the battle between Indra and Vritra is found in the Rigveda in which Vritra is described as the demon of drought. Indra killed the demon and liberated water, earning the title VRITRAHAN - the slayer of Vritra. In the Rigveda, Indra was praised as a compassionate friend, a brother, a father and mother in one.

With the rise of Vaishnavism (4th century B. C.), however, Indra lost his place of importance to Vishnu. In the Puranic versions, Indra invariably runs to Vishnu, whenever he is in trouble. He is beaten again and again by the Asuras and he is able to emerge victorious only when Vishnu bestows on him his guidance and favour.

Our account of Indra's encounter with his arch enemy, Vritra, is based on the Bhagawat Purana, which differs a great deal from versions of the same episode in the Vedas and the Mahabharata.

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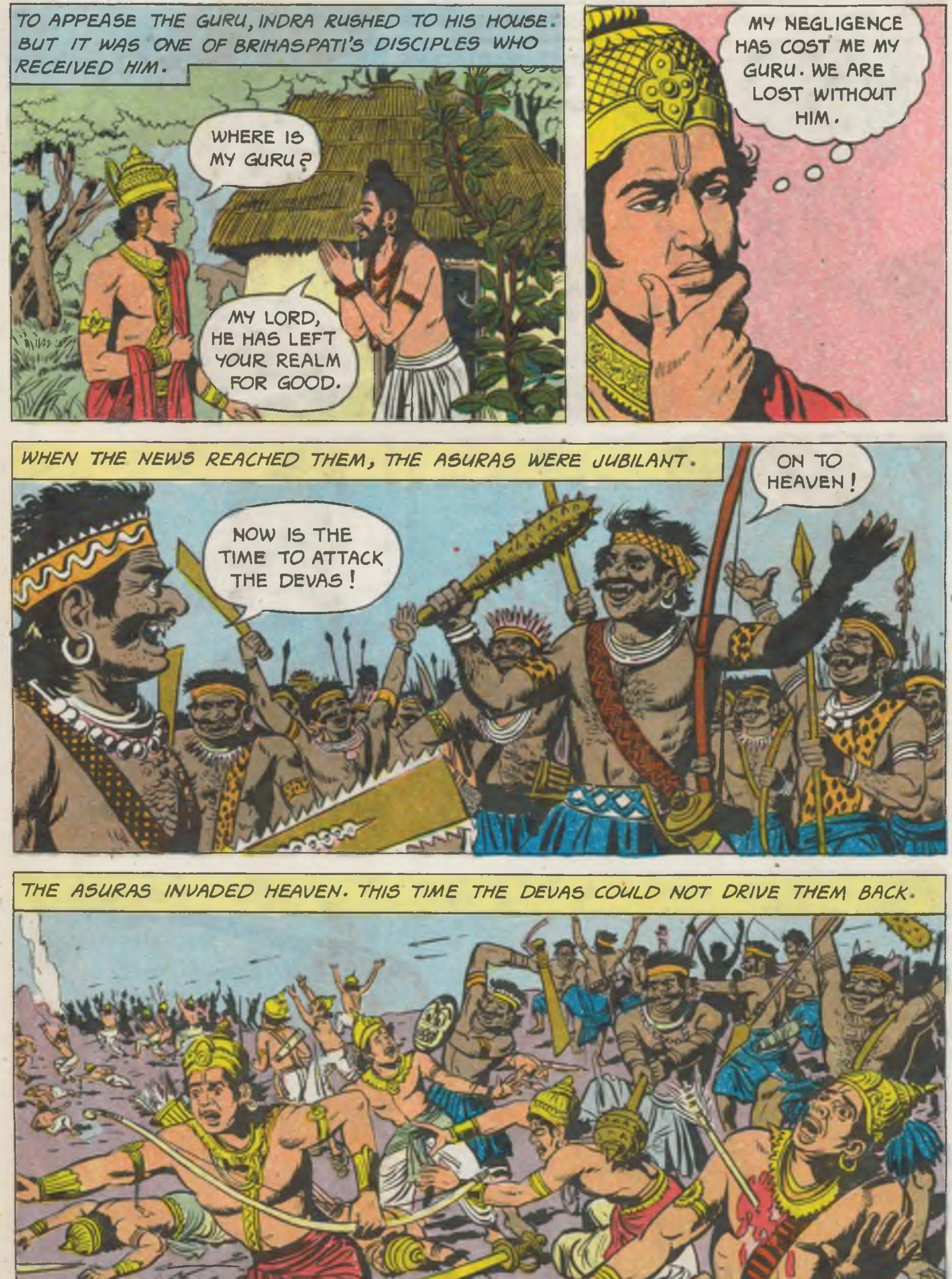
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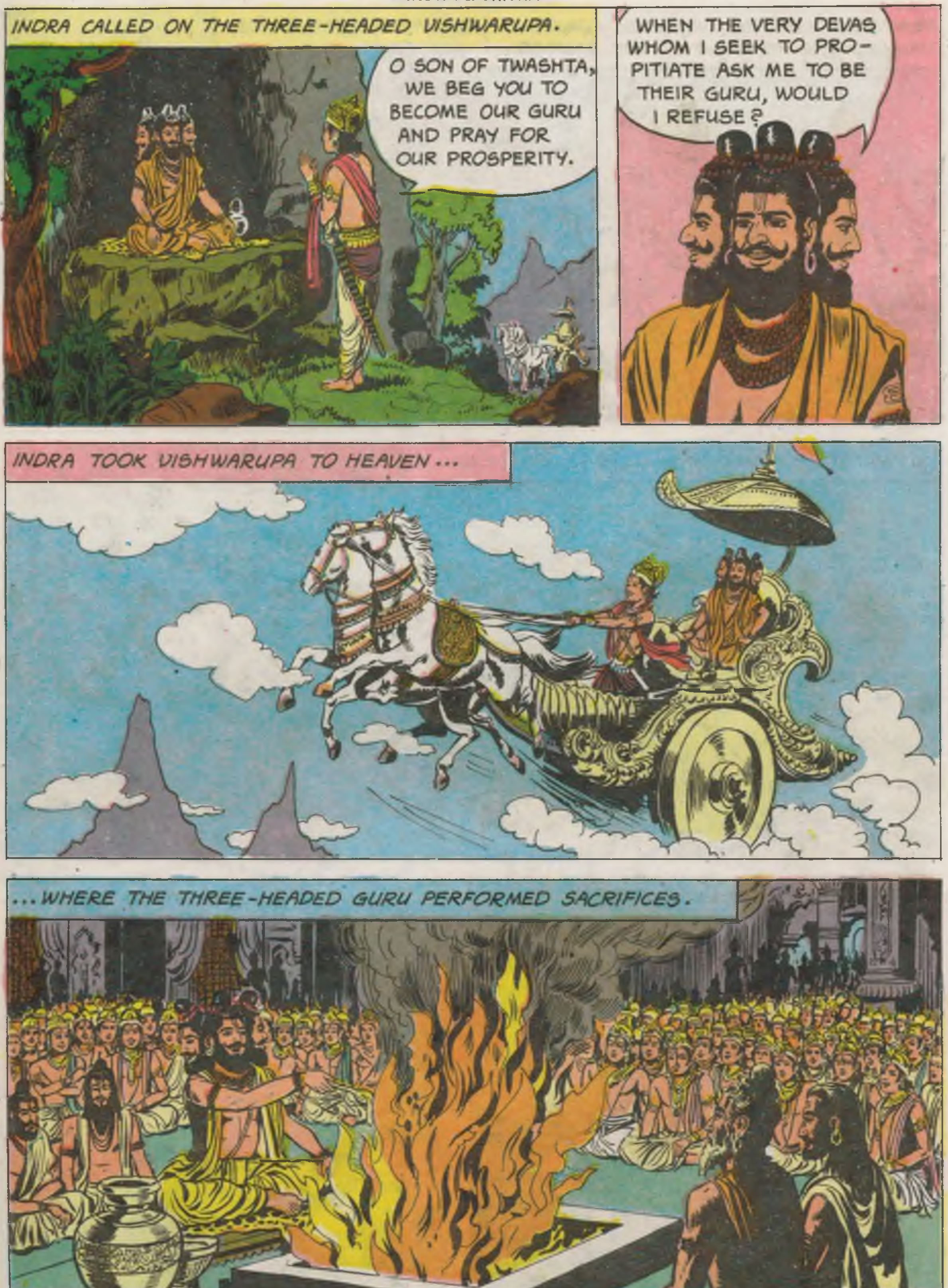
INDRA AND VRITRA




ONE DAY BRIHASPATI CAME TO SEE INDRA. ENGROSSED IN THE DANCE AT HIS COURT, INDRA DID NOT SEE HIS GURU AND REMAINED RUDELY SEATED.
HIS TRIUMPHS HAVE MADE HIM ARROGANT!
I SHALL NOT STAY WHERE I'M NO LONGER RESPECTED.
AS HE STOMPED OUT IN A RAGE, INDRA SUDDENLY NOTICED HIM.
IT'S MY GURU! WHEN DID HE COME? ALAS! I'VE UNWTTINGLY OFFENDED HIM!

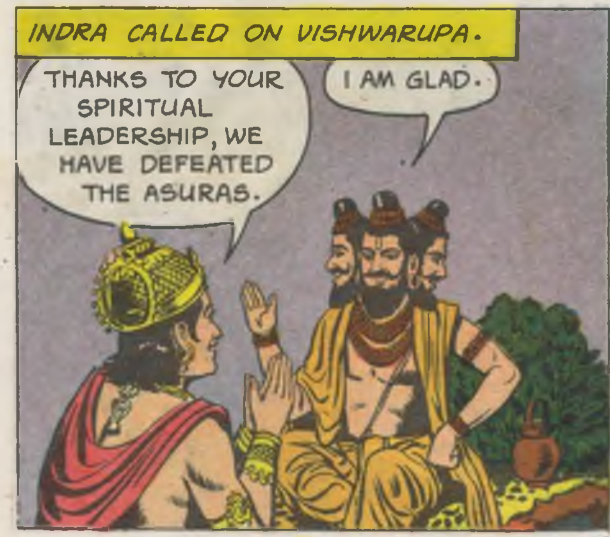

TO APPEASE THE GURU, INDRA RUSHED TO HIS HOUSE. BUT IT WAS ONE OF BRIHASPATI'S DISCIPLES WHO RECEIVED HIM.
WHERE IS MY GURU?
MY LORD, HE HAS LEFT YOUR REALM FOR GOOD.
MY NEGLIGENCE HAS COST ME MY GURU. WE ARE LOST WITHOUT HIM.
WHEN THE NEWS REACHED THEM, THE ASURAS WERE JUBILANT.
NOW IS THE TIME TO ATTACK THE DEVAS!
ON TO HEAVEN!
THE ASURAS INVADED HEAVEN. THIS TIME THE DEVAS COULD NOT DRIVE THEM BACK.

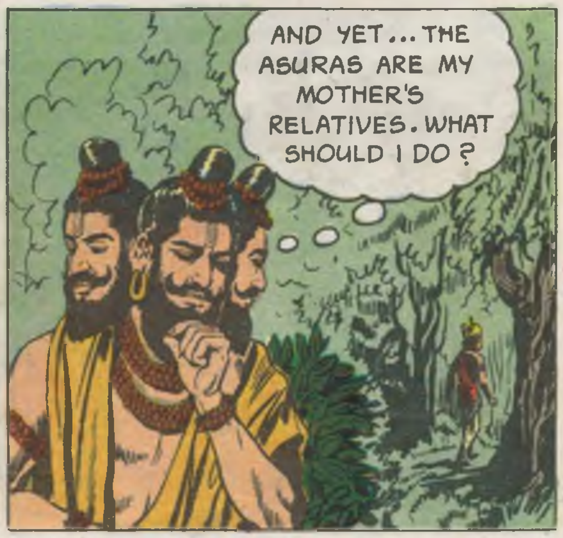

DEFEATED IN THE BATTLE, INDRA SOUGHT BRAHMA'S ADVICE.
WHAT YOU LACK IS THE SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE OF A GURU.
GO AND SEEK THE HELP OF VISHWARUPA, THE SON OF SAGE TWASHTA.
BUT HIS MOTHER IS RELATED TO THE ASURAS!
VISHWARUPA HAS SUBDUED HIS PASSIONS COMPLETELY. HE WILL BE THE IDEAL GURU.
YOU KNOW WHAT IS BEST, MY LORD. I WILL TAKE YOUR ADVICE.


INDRA CALLED ON THE THREE-HEADED VISHWARUPA.
O SON OF TWASHTA, WE BEG YOU TO BECOME OUR GURU AND PRAY FOR OUR PROSPERITY.
WHEN THE VERY DEVAS WHOM I SEEK TO PRO-PITIATE ASK ME TO BE THEIR GURU, WOULD I REFUSE?
INDRA TOOK VISHWARUPA TO HEAVEN ...
... WHERE THE THREE-HEADED GURU PERFORMED SACRIFICES.


REINFORCED BY THE SPIRITUAL POWER OF VISHWARUPA, THE DEVAS INVADED THE KINGDOM OF THE ASURAS ...


...INFLICTED A CRUSHING DEFEAT ON THEM ...
...AND RETURNED HOME IN TRIUMPH.

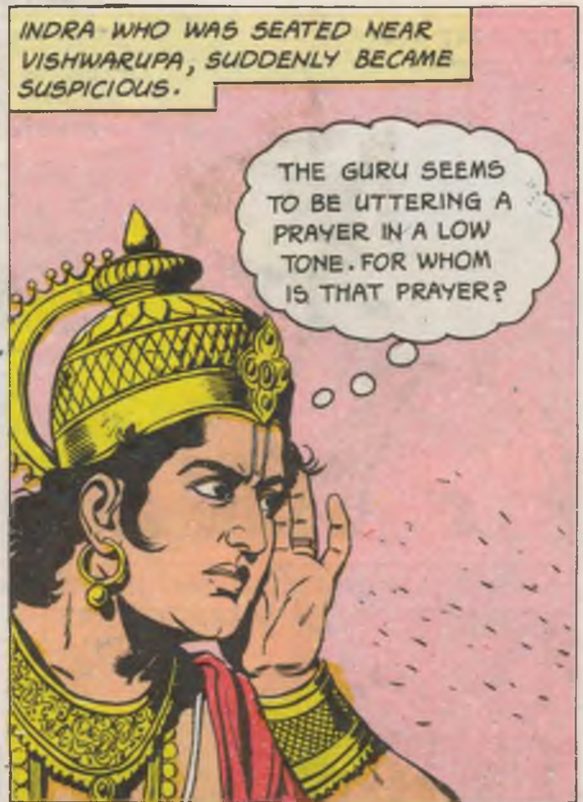

INDRA CALLED ON VISHWARUPA.
THANKS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP, WE HAVE DEFEATED THE ASURAS.
I AM GLAD.


AND YET... THE ASURAS ARE MY MOTHER'S RELATIVES. WHAT SHOULD I DO ?


I KNOW. HENCE FORTH I SHALL STRIVE FOR THE GOOD OF THE ASURAS TOO.
A FEW DAYS LATER AT THE COURT OF INDRA—
THE ASURAS ARE HERE, MY LORD.
IMPOSSIBLE! NOT SO SOON AFTER THE LAST CRUSHING DEFEAT!
IN THE BATTLE THAT FOLLOWED...
...THE DEVAS REPELLED THE ATTACK BUT WITH MUCH DIFFICULTY.
WE'LL BE BACK, YET.

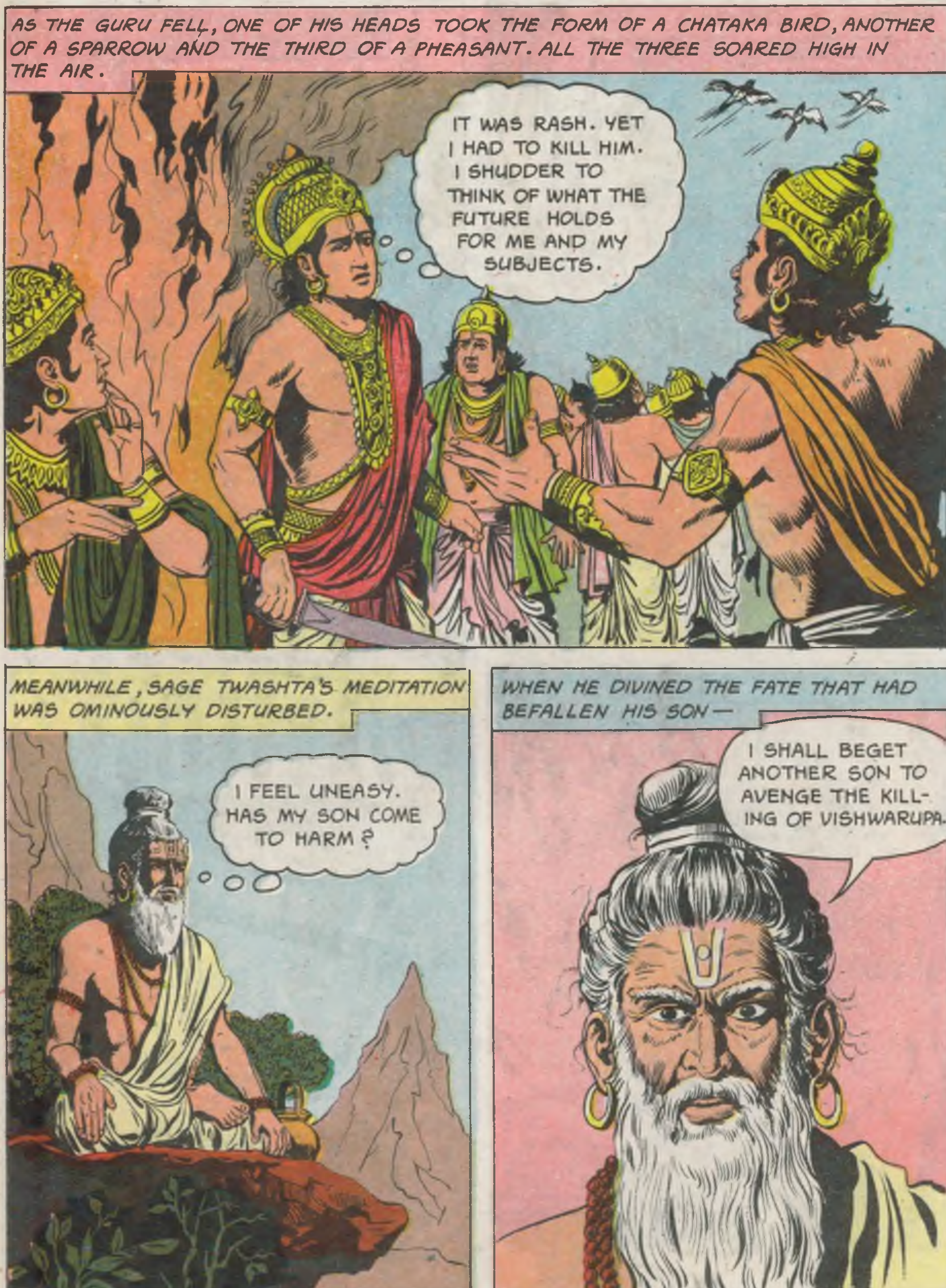

VISHWARUPA WAS HAPPY.
GOOD! I HAVE SUCCEEDED. I HAVE MADE THEM EQUALLY STRONG. NEITHER CAN DEFEAT THE OTHER!
MEANWHILE, INDRA CONFERRED WITH THE OTHER DEVAS.
THE BATTLE WITH THE ASURAS PROVED INDECISIVE.
WHAT COULD THE SECRET OF THEIR RENEWED STRENGTH BE?
A WORRIED INDRA APPROACHED VISHWARUPA.
O, GURU, PLEASE PRAY FOR OUR ABSOLUTE VICTORY.
I SHALL PERFORM A SACRIFICE FOR YOUR SUCCESS...
...AND FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE ASURAS TOO.


ALL THE DEVAS ASSEMBLED TO WATCH THE SACRED RITUAL.
MAY THE OFFERING OF THESE GRAINS MAKE THE DEVAS STRONGER.


INDRA WHO WAS SEATED NEAR VISHWARUPA, SUDDENLY BECAME SUSPICIOUS.
THE GURU SEEMS TO BE UTTERING A PRAYER IN A LOW TONE. FOR WHOM IS THAT PRAYER?


MAY THIS OFFERING OF GHEE MAKE THE DEVAS POWERFUL.
WHY HASN'T HE POURED ALL OF IT?


THE NEXT MOMENT —
...AND MAY THIS OFFERING FILL THE ASURAS WITH STRENGTH.
INDRA STOOD UP.
SO THAT IS THE SECRET OF THEIR STRENGTH! TRAITOR!
HE DREW OUT HIS SWORD AND CUT OFF VISHWARUPA'S HEADS.


AS THE GURU FELL, ONE OF HIS HEADS TOOK THE FORM OF A CHATAKA BIRD, ANOTHER OF A SPARROW AND THE THIRD OF A PHEASANT. ALL THE THREE SOARED HIGH IN THE AIR.
IT WAS RASH. YET I HAD TO KILL HIM. I SHUDDER TO THINK OF WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR ME AND MY SUBJECTS.
MEANWHILE, SAGE TWASHTA'S MEDITATION WAS OMINOUSLY DISTURBED.
I FEEL UNEASY. HAS MY SON COME TO HARM?
WHEN HE DIVINED THE FATE THAT HAD BEFALLEN HIS SON—
I SHALL BEGET ANOTHER SON TO AVENGE THE KILLING OF VISHWARUPA.


HE BEGAN TO PERFORM A YAGNA.
ARISE, O ENEMY OF INDRA!
THE NEXT MOMENT —
YOU ARE VRITRA! GROW UP VRITRA, FAST ...
VRITRA, STOOD UP, BRIDGING EARTH AND HEAVEN.
O VRITRA, SEEK OUT INDRA AND DESTROY HIM.


AS VRITRA NEARED HEAVEN, INDRA AND THE OTHER DEVAS RAINED A SHOWER OF ARROWS AND SPEARS ON HIM.

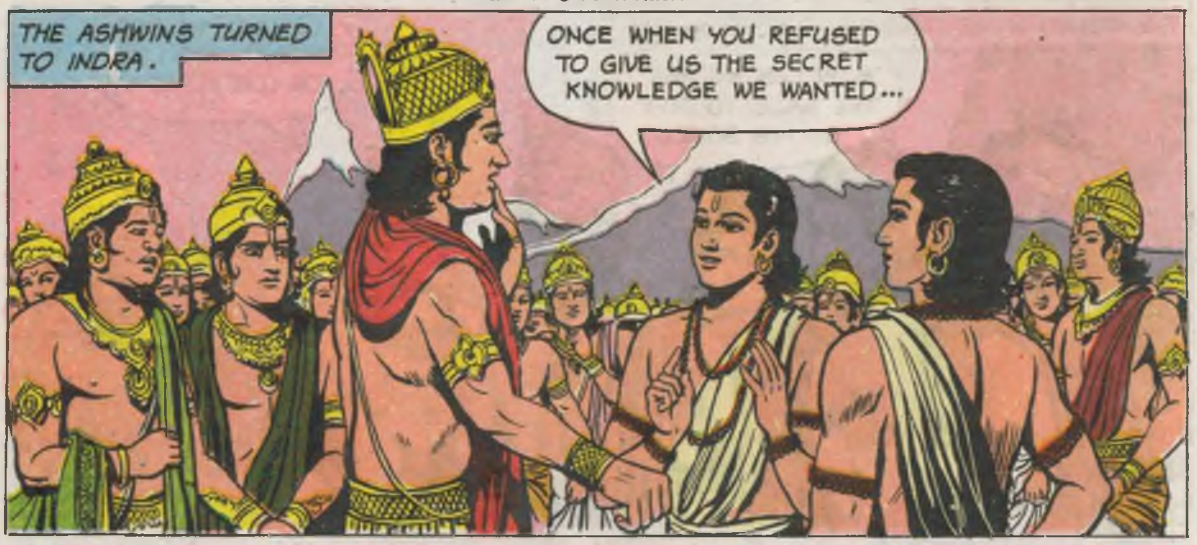

BUT THE GREAT ASURA OPENED HIS HUGE MOUTH AND SWALLOWED THEM.


THE DEVAS FLED FROM HEAVEN.
COME BACK, O DEVAS. WON'T YOU GIVE ME BATTLE?

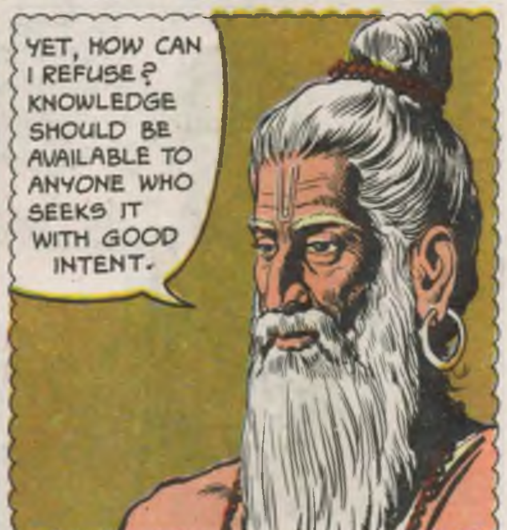

INDRA PRAYED TO LORD VISHNU.
O VISHNU, PROTECTOR OF THE RIGHTEOUS, COME TO OUR AID.
AS LORD VISHNU APPEARED, INDRA AND THE OTHER DEVAS FELL AT HIS FEET.
RISE, O DEVAS.
NO WEAPON CAN HARM VRITRA WHO WAS BORN THROUGH THE AUSTE-RITIES OF TWASHTA, EXCEPT ...
... A WEAPON MADE OF THE BONES OF SAGE DADHICHI WHOSE AUSTERITIES MATCH THOSE OF TWASHTA. ONLY BY WIELDING THAT WEAPON, CAN INDRA SLAY VRITRA.



* THE TWIN DEVAS WHO ARE THE CELESTIAL PHYSICIANS.


THE ASHWINS TURNED TO INDRA.
ONCE WHEN YOU REFUSED TO GIVE US THE SECRET KNOWLEDGE WE WANTED...


"...WE APPROACHED DADHICHI."
I'VE BEEN WARNED THAT MY HEAD WOULD SPLIT, IF I REVEALED THAT LEARNING TO ANYONE.

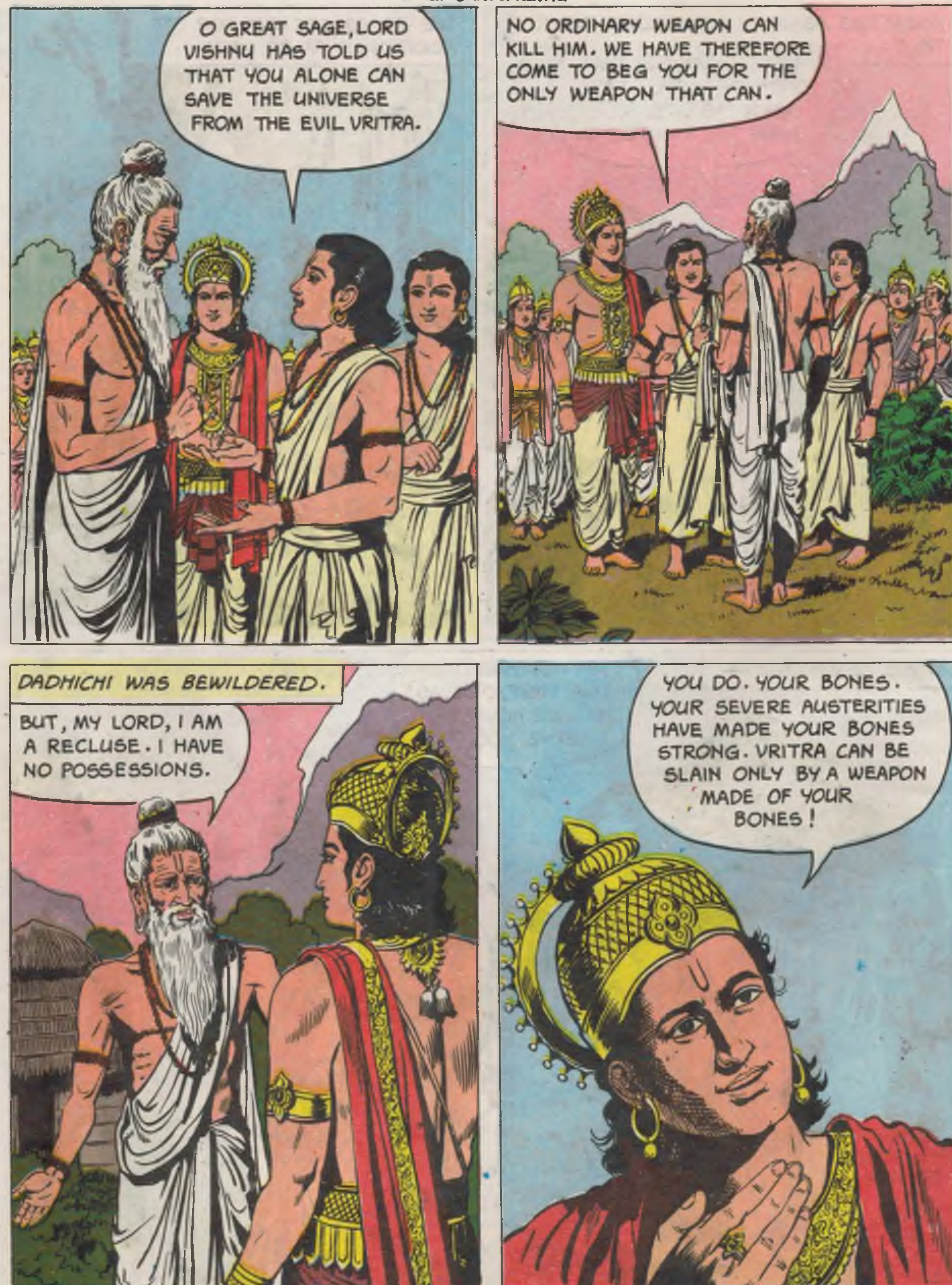

YET, HOW CAN I REFUSE? KNOWLEDGE SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO ANYONE WHO SEEKS IT WITH GOOD INTENT.

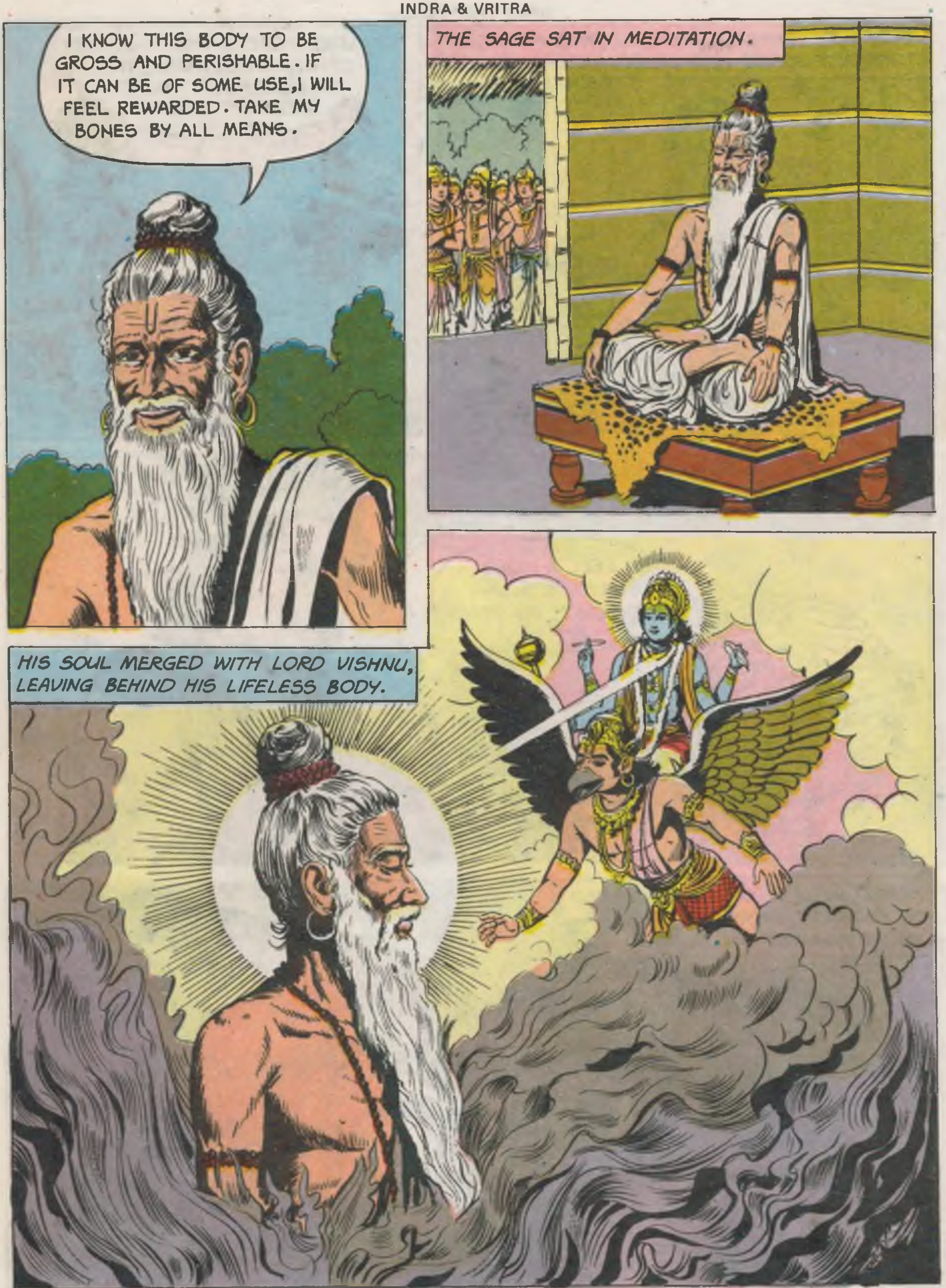

I WILL TEACH YOU, COME WHAT MAY.
HOLY ONE, WE CANNOT BE THE CAUSE OF YOUR UNTIMELY DEATH. HOWEVER...


... THERE IS A WAY OUT.
" WE BROUGHT HIM THE HEAD OF A HORSE ..."
ALLOW US TO REPLACE YOUR HEAD WITH THIS ONE.
" AND WE TRANSPLANTED THE HEAD."
" THE GREAT SAGE THEN INSTRUCTED US IN THE SECRET LORE."


"THE MOMENT HE FINISHED, HIS NEW HEAD SPLIT UP INTO PIECES."
"WITHIN SECONDS WE REPLACED HIS OWN HEAD."
MAY YOUR KNOWLEDGE BE EVER FOR THE GOOD OF THE UNIVERSE.


WHEN THE ASHWINS CONCLUDED THEIR TALE —
I AM CONVINCED THAT DADHICHI WOULD LAY DOWN HIS LIFE TO HELP THE RIGHTEOUS.
THE DEVAS SET OUT FOR THE HERMITAGE OF DADHICHI.
AT HIS HERMITAGE —
I AM HONOURED BY YOUR VISIT, O DEVAS! TELL ME HOW I CAN SERVE YOU.

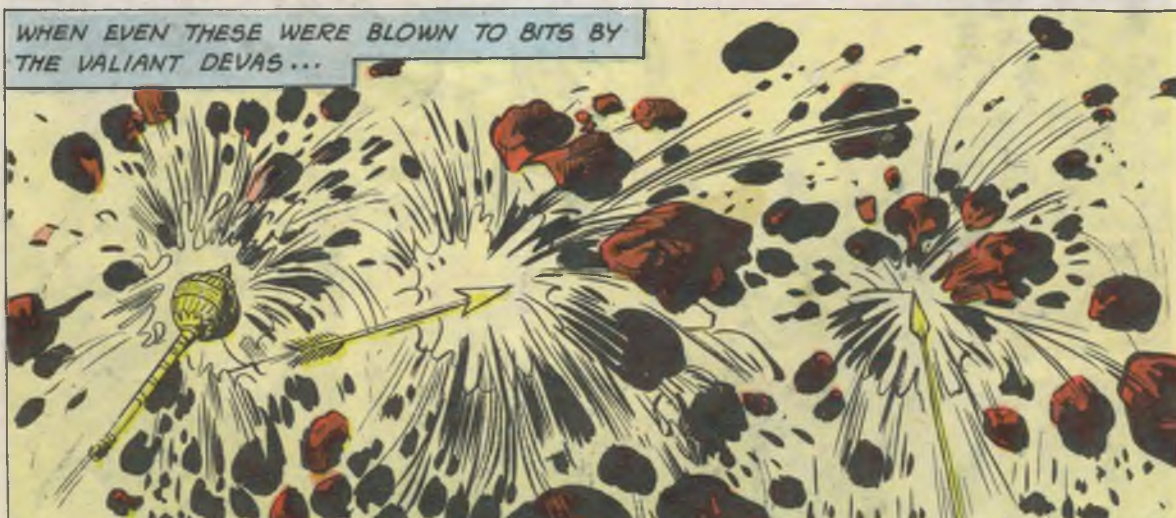

O GREAT SAGE, LORD VISHNU HAS TOLD US THAT YOU ALONE CAN SAVE THE UNIVERSE FROM THE EVIL VRITRA.
NO ORDINARY WEAPON CAN KILL HIM. WE HAVE THEREFORE COME TO BEG YOU FOR THE ONLY WEAPON THAT CAN.
DADHICHI WAS BEWILDERED.
BUT, MY LORD, I AM A RECLUSE. I HAVE NO POSSESSIONS.
YOU DO. YOUR BONES. YOUR SEVERE AUSTERITIES HAVE MADE YOUR BONES STRONG. VRITRA CAN BE SLAIN ONLY BY A WEAPON MADE OF YOUR BONES!


I KNOW THIS BODY TO BE GROSS AND PERISHABLE. IF IT CAN BE OF SOME USE, I WILL FEEL REWARDED. TAKE MY BONES BY ALL MEANS.
THE SAGE SAT IN MEDITATION.
HIS SOUL MERGED WITH LORD VISHNU, LEAVING BEHIND HIS LIFELESS BODY.


THEN VISHWAKARMA, THE CELESTIAL ARCHITECT TOOK HIS BONES AND BEGAN MAKING A WEAPON.
LORD, HERE IS THE DEADLIEST OF WEAPONS, VAJRA, THE THUNDERBOLT. TAKE IT AND FIGHT VRITRA.
AS SOON AS INDRA ACCEPTED THE WEAPON —
I FEEL A NEW VITALITY SURGING THROUGH MY VEINS.
ARMED WITH VAJRA AND MOUNTED ON AIRAVATA, INDRA LED THE DEVAS AGAINST THE ASURAS.


FIERCE WAS THE BATTLE THAT WAS FOUGHT ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER NARMADA.


THE ASURAS, WHOSE WEAPONS WERE SOON EXHAUSTED, BEGAN TO HURL MOUNTAIN PEAKS AT THE DEVAS.


WHEN EVEN THESE WERE BLOWN TO BITS BY THE VALIANT DEVAS ...


...THE ASURAS TOOK TO THEIR HEELS WITH THE DEVAS IN HOT PURSUIT.
THEN VRITRA ARRIVED ON THE SCENE.
WHY DO YOU RUN AFTER COWARDS? TO KILL FUGITIVE WARRIORS IS NOT WORTHY OF HEROES. I'LL GIVE YOU BATTLE, IF YOU SO DESIRE. COME ON!
SEETHING WITH ANGER, INDRA HURLED A WEAPON AT VRITRA.

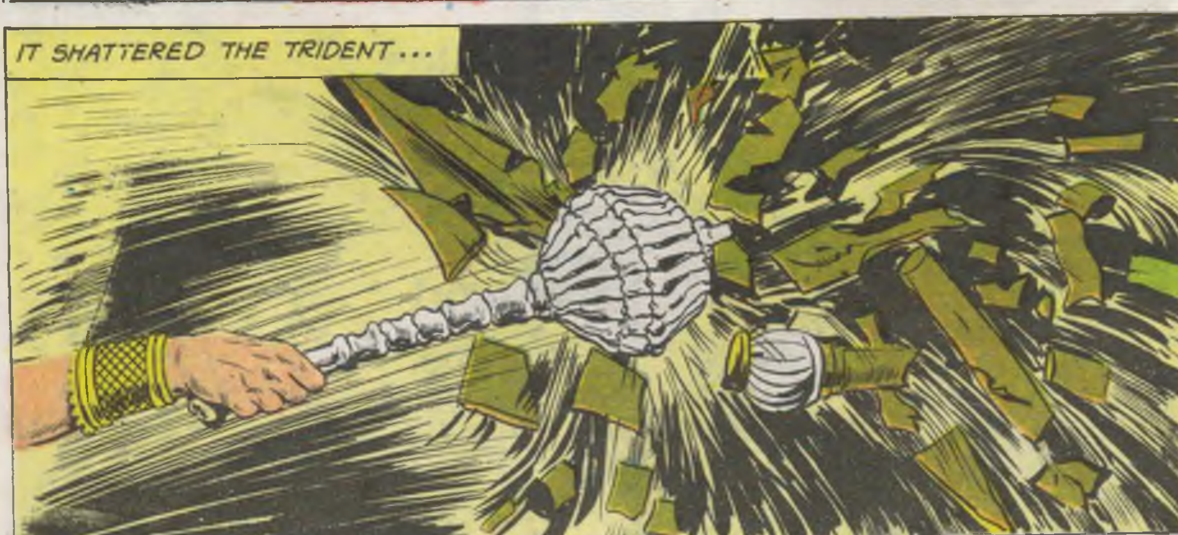

VRITRA CAUGHT IT WITH HIS LEFT HAND...


...AND STRUCK INDRA'S MOUNT WITH IT.


INDRA'S MOUNT, AIRAVATA, BEGAN TO RUN AMUCK ON THE BATTLEFIELD.


SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY, VRITRA AIMED HIS TERRIBLE TRIDENT AT INDRA.


AS THE TRIDENT CAME FLYING AT HIM, INDRA RAISED HIS VAJRA.


IT SHATTERED THE TRIDENT...


... AND SEVERED ONE OF VRITRA'S ARMS.
ENRAGED, VRITRA FELL UPON INDRA AND STRUCK HIM WITH A MASSIVE BLUDGEON.
THE VAJRA FLEW OFF INDRA'S HANDS AND FELL TO THE GROUND.
I'VE LOST MY WEAPON. HOW CAN I CONTINUE THE FIGHT?


I LOSE AN ARM AND I STILL FIGHT. YOU MISS A MERE WEAPON AND WOULD FLEE ?
OUR COMBAT IS LIKE A GAME OF DICE. THE OUTCOME IS NOT KNOWN TO US. FIGHT, INDRA, FIGHT !
PICKING UP THE VAJRA, INDRA SMILED AT VRITRA.
O VRITRA, IT IS A PLEASURE TO FIGHT WITH ONE AS VALOR-OUS AS YOU. HERE COMES MY VAJRA !
AS INDRA'S VAJRA STRUCK —


THE DEVAS WERE JUBILANT.
VRITRA IS FINISHED!
WITHOUT HIS ARMS, HE IS AS GOOD AS DEAD!
VRITRA ROARED WITH ANGER.
IF I AM AS GOOD AS DEAD, SO SHALL INDRA BE!
THEN THE MIGHTY ASURA OPENED HIS MOUTH AND DREW A DEEP BREATH.
AAAAAA


TO HIS SURPRISE, INDRA FOUND HIMSELF BEING DRAWN TOWARDS THE ASURA.
ALONG WITH AIRAVATA, HE FELL INTO THE MOUTH OF THE ASURA, WENT DOWN HIS GULLET...
...AND HIT HIS ABDOMEN WITH A THUD.
VRITRA HAS INVITED DEATH UPON HIMSELF.
HE CUT OPEN VRITRA'S ABDOMEN WITH HIS VAJRA...


...AND CAME OUT.
INDRA IS BACK!
BUT THE EVIL ASURA IS STILL ALIVE!
INDRA HURLED HIS VAJRA WITH ALL HIS MIGHT AT VRITRA...
...AND THIS TIME THE VAJRA FOUND ITS MARK.
I SALUTE YOU, VRITRA. YOU DIED A GLORIOUS DEATH.